

Reading Caragiale. Between contestation and acknowledgement

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Abstract: *An important question is, who Caragiale really was and how can his psychosocial and professional profile be defined? It is rather difficult to identify a certain place, relative to the necessary precepts of the literary movements or the social conventions of his times. The affable Caragiale becomes a misfit who always functioned out of sync with the tendencies of his era and the wishes or decisions of his contemporaries. Despite, or rather thanks to this status, that „reflex of common sense” can be described as a „value of judgment” of those times, proof being that he is perceived in the same manner after more than a century. Despite everything mentioned, Caragiale was not easy to read, a moralist befitting his time. Why did he choose to be a genuine actor outside the stage and not entirely in the middle of the representation? Was it because of the manner in which he built his character, was it because he was afraid of being compared to a certain typology of character?*

Key-words: *Caragiale; mechanism; game of masks.*

Cioculescu is one of the most sensitive and visionary critics and columnists of Caragiale and, as he suggests:

Caragiale is one of those writers meant to stir up ceaseless commentaries from different points of view that the future generations will appropriate. This is the glorious fate of the writer with a message, even though it is an indirect message as it was that of the great ironist, who left for society nothing else but a deceitful mirror for its true faces. The posterity is a continuous replica in front of such a writer, with a game of mirrors turned to itself as a tribute to reciprocity. A literary work framed within classic canons and somehow limited such as Caragiale’s work, as much as it is susceptible to various interpretations, it is less enigmatic than his actual physiognomy. (Cioculescu Ș. 1987, 7)

And so it is. This aspect emerges in every written work that centers on Caragiale. If his literature was limited by the „classic canons” (we also have the influences from *Junimea* that have left a print easy to identify but impossible to get rid of), the character embedded in the chaotic psychological profile of the master had free rein, based on lucid observation, general and particular. It seems that all the images created by writers, critics, friends or foes, in an attempt to describe Caragiale have led to a „game of mirrors” turned to this fabulous I, rich and contrasting, who was the grand master.

Șerban Cioculescu identifies as a possible explanation for this type of social behavior, excessively specific to Caragiale, his fear of loneliness.

His fears (he was afraid of fire or illness), his superstitions (he believed in the „evil eye”), the extreme nervousness, the influence of music on his nerves racked by waking and bohemian life, the terror against physical suffering and death reveal in Caragiale the conformation of an anxious person.

In spite of his mastery on the most balanced artistic form, the grand ironist was lacking moral balance. The actor tortured through his will and intelligence his public around a table, but was at the same time afraid of all the obscure forces of mystery that are controlling our fate. This is the only way of explaining his fear of loneliness, which is the key of his social graces. The pathetic section of his work does not introduce as completely in his

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anxious sensibility. Caragiale lived his restlessness behind a mask that his reputation of comic author had established for him. (Cioculescu Ș. 1987, 8)

And we may add as well his frustration caused by the impossibility of becoming a professional actor, a career he had wished for while having vocation and talent, but whose experience proved to be one of Caragiale's biggest disappointments. This explanation seems rather simple, though, if we take into account the manner in which Caragiale was feeding upon the fundamental and archetypal areas of the human spirit and the immense joy he had while turning the experiences into stories. It is rather difficult to believe that a man of such a great spirituality would consider the „obscure forces of mystery, that are controlling our fate” as an imminent danger that he rejected his entire life by using comedy. The certain thing is that Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, one of those considered pioneers of „the obscure forces of mystery”, going even further, was not one of his friends.

Marina Cap-Bun also underlines the actantial excesses that define our great writer while quoting Florin Manolescu and *Caragiale and Caragiale: Games with various strategies*

Caragiale loved and hated, praised and attacked, all while feeding every possible hypothesis of interpreting his attitude. Some could argue on his authentic patriotism while others may refer to his anti-Romanian feelings. Luckier than Slavici, Caragiale was never in jail for his beliefs, but there were some propositions in press and who knows what might have happened to him without Maiorescu's intervention in 1885. Applauded and despised, awarded and contested, prohibited and celebrated officially, Caragiale remains a sum of contrasts, a conscience at times clear, but also troubled and hurried, always playing games with various strategies. (Cap-Bun, M. 2003, 121)

The contrasting duality of Caragiale's psychology is explained in an unidirectional manner and extensively, with humor and pleasant phrases by Paul Zarifopol, one of the oldest and most sincere friends of the master. He includes his various thoughts on Caragiale and his audience in the „register of tender ideas,” as a cultural real obligation of giving up on masks and hypocrisy. This extremely interesting commenter of the cultural phenomenon of those times does no spare his friend while giving him the title of „lazy southerner.”

Caragiale was a lazy southerner, endowed with supernormal intelligence and fantasy. Everyone who managed to observe him, agree in this matter regarding him: the fantastic use of spirit and images he was capable of certainly showed an unusual intense internal life. Relentless in speaking -the only diligence the southerner was capable of- he was suffering roughly of the persistent crisis caused by the written word. Writing means work and work itself in uncomfortable; and Caragiale hated this malaise with a sensual violence (...) „Wearing a shirt, barefoot, laying in a port at midday while entertaining the bystanders with my stories” I've heard him once saying...(Zarifopol, 1997, 187)

In the semiology of the specific reception of the critical apparatus, Zarifopol's hypothesis is rather interesting. We do not know where to draw the line between the professional and personal relationship of these two, if we are allowed to categorize it like this. Therefore, the theory of the “lazy southerner” will be interpreted in this paper only from a specific and subjective approach of the two, critic and writer, while this clarification is needed because the theory above mentioned appears many times in Zarifopol's allegations.

Writing means effort; and a southerner feels great pressure while working silently. I am almost inclined to believe that exactly this grief and repulsion, an enemy of his true self, unleash a particular energy in the soul of the southerner forced to work in silence and makes him work with bitter toil which explains decently the much quoted stylistic perfection of the southern literatures. But we must not forget the fact that the southerner is obsessed when he stays quiet with the sentimental and aesthetic effects of the word spoken loudly. Caragiale's writing has a place of honor in this tradition, Latin, so called verbal scrupulosity. When it

came to grammar and its correct use, like Malherbe and Boileau, he was fanatical to the extremes: he was fastidiously repeating that the man will not blow the candle out with his eyelashes, as he pretended that Eminescu's verse tended to suggest. (Zarifopol, 1997, 188).

Here, we will allow ourselves to back it up one step and observe closer Caragiale's "verbal scrupulosity", which holds in esteem writing. *Moș Virgulă* was indeed obsessively interested in the correct writing. He proved in many pages what a difference can make a comma put in one place or another or a comma put in the wrong place and many of his collaborators put their trust in him as proofreader of the different magazines where he worked. Eminescu himself, who was „profoundly serious and did not enjoy Caragiale's cynical attitude” acknowledged in a letter dedicated to I. Slavici that he „appreciated his grammar sense and his instantaneous intelligence in catching up with every form of creation, alienated of his own structure; that is why he valued his artistic judgment.”. (Cioculescu, 1987, 7-8).

The fluency of Caragiale's discourse and the eloquence of his ideal contents, strong in essence and expression, have their roots deep in the popular soil. Caragiale's sociability often turned against him as a weapon by the other writers can be itself a debatable topic. Caragiale did not make any difference between ranks in society and used to accept them all with the same joy and nonchalance. Either he was speaking with vendors in the stations or with generals and actors, Caragiale mastered perfectly the mechanism of balancing his discourse and his judgmental values, taking communication to a level not yet accepted at that time.

Caragiale was not an exclusive writer, literary man, comfortable only among his brothers and misunderstood by the ignorant ones; on the contrary, his sociability was so diverse that he did not choose between the opportunities offered to him. He had good and well known friends of every rank, in rather diverse environments: literature, education, army, commerce, journalism, theater, least but not last, the vendors, butchers, and fishers from Sinaia whom he was saluting from Berlin via doctor Urechia. (Cioculescu, 1987, 7-8).

Thus, who actually was Caragiale and how can be defined his psychosocial and professional profile? It is hard to identify a certain place, relative to the necessary precepts of the literary movements or the social conventions of those times. According to the columnists, the great writer remained till the end of his life a rebel, a misfit with a cause unknown to many, a writer who marked the morals or social and political customs of his time from a “reflex of common sense” (“Nowadays, from our literary perspective, Caragiale's work appears as a reflex of common sense against the misconducts of his times from the fair judgment”) and a writer who, because of this reflex, died far from home. From this point of view, the affable Caragiale becomes a misfit who always functioned out of sync with the tendencies of his time and the wishes and decisions of his contemporaries. Despite or rather grace to this status, his “reflex of common sense” can be considered as a “value of judgment” of that time, proof being that he is still perceived the same these days, after more than a century. The value judgments have a precise timeline only to justify once again their traceability in time. Despite all these, Caragiale was not a comfortable writher, a moralist of his time. Șerban Cioculescu's question is relevant in the debate of this issue.

Thus, if we are entitled to see Caragiale as a strong unit of judgment, does this mean that the great writer was a popular writer, synchronized with the reactions of the common opinions of his time? We believe that he was not. Far from acknowledging the level of sensitiveness of his time, Caragiale was always against it. (Cioculescu, 1987, 7-8).

From this point of view, the „game of mirrors” remained after so many years satisfyingly clear and of course, uncomfortable. Caragiale's inner game of masks in a spiritual world decorated as we could see in total contradiction with his century appears clearly in his political choices as well. Some would say that after deepening into the mentality

of a certain category of people who boasted in the name of a particular doctrine, he used to retreat with disgust.

His inner being was not allowing him though to distance himself too much because he needed new references for his work. And there he was, jumping again in the midst of a society organized by a false dynamic, as he was meant to discover eventually. And so it came that, despite his sympathy towards the liberal doctrine, after the victory of liberalism, Caragiale switches sides and chooses the conservative Junimea, a side he was meant to leave later with disappointment. Many times people argued on his inconsistent political opinions, especially since the political world was vividly present in his Caragiale's work. In the article „O viață furtunoasă,” published in 1895, in *Moș Teacă*, Anton Bacalbașa reminds all of them in a friendly manner. According to Marina Cap-Bun, everybody else used these references as a double edged sword against the writer, particularly regarding his early days.

It would appear that his literary struggles had more chances of victory than his political revelations. His comedies, often based on a political structure – *O scrisoare pierdută*, *O noapte furtunoasă* și *Conu Leonida* – popular nowadays as well, were hitting so hard the political scenery of his time and berated it. Maybe this is how we can explain the lack of political will with regard to the acknowledgment of Caragiale on every known level and his rewarding with better jobs, either from a financial point of view, or from a spiritual satisfaction one. This aspect contributed strongly to Caragiale's self-imposed estrangement, almost against his will, near the end of his life – his departure to Berlin.

When it comes to the definition of the writer, Caragiale would not blend in again. Different from his characters that wanted so much to shock, Caragiale was simply shocking through his distinct way of seeing things, opposed to that of those around him, through the manner in which he chose to express himself, through the excessive shyness in some matters that he chose to hide with a booming laugh.

Caragiale was not an exclusive writer, literary man, comfortable only among his brothers and misunderstood by the ignorant ones; on the contrary, his sociability was so diverse that he did not choose between the opportunities offered to him. He had good and well known friends of every rank, in rather diverse environments: literature, education, army, commerce, journalism, theater, least but not last, the vendors, butchers, and fishers from Sinaia whom he was saluting from Berlin. He could blend in in every environment, academic, suburban or outlying with an unparalleled chameleonic ability that he was aware of, as an actor on stage. (Cioculescu, 1987, 7-8).

But why not, have asked many critics and researchers from Caragiale's period and to this day. Why did he choose to be a genuine actor outside the stage and not entirely in the middle of the spectacle? Was it because of the manner in which he built his characters, was it because he was afraid of being compared to a certain typology of character? Maybe he desired to remain the great puppeteer who would control all the acting strategies in such a manner that would allow him to keep the clarity given by his distance towards the object and subject of the action. Thus, we come back to Brecht. We believe that this special author used the „distancing effect” excessively at times, in his life as well as in his work or on stage. This „distancing effect” offered Caragiale the necessary space to think, tell stories, laugh and joke, criticize and recover his used energy in order to reinvest it in a more creative way. This is why Caragiale's reactions to all the events in his present, to the opinions of his contemporaries towards them and the general opinion, quickly fixed by the great names that were choosing quiet opinions are in fact opposing reactions. His lucid and relevant analysis of the surrounding world and the characters that live in it allowed him to be a voice against, to be the „different opinion” in the circle and be able to sustain this opinion with arguments, irony, turns of phrases, everything in order to have a clearer image of the world of his time.

„Far from acknowledging the level of sensitiveness of his time, Caragiale was always against it”, (Cioculescu, 1987, 9) suggests Cioculescu, his sensible biographer.

Caragiale seems to be in the same response with his descendant, Luca Ion. According to Lovinescu, the man who pushed to the extremes the art of concentration and limited life to unique and expressive lines would not recognize himself in his heir, as the tight man would not recognize himself in his prodigal son. Luca Ion would waste Ion Luca's restricted observations without any selection or the intuition of the ultimate purpose. The same qualities would become crowded in the person of Luca Ion. The old maker had taken the verbal idolatry to impressive heights; he polished the idea of word, taking it to his essential role in phrase. The young son inherited as well the cult of the word, but not from an understanding point of view, but an audible one; Ion Luca's aesthetics went far, to the use of own terms and the suppression of the adjective; on the other hand, Luca Ion's aesthetics reached and abused of verbal resonance. (Lovinescu, 1982, 57)

In another kind of reaction which could be translated as being against the flow of his time, Caragiale meets the political world. We should repeat that the counter time in which Caragiale lived and created his work seems to shape him a personal space, of emission and reception for posterity directly from his tormented present.

His three comedies based on a political structure, popular even nowadays were hitting so hard the political current of his times. They have fought with the secret or confessed sympathies of the public from stalls and galleries, for progress. As it was typical for his genius, the fight was won on stage but not in sync with the political movement but exactly the opposite, contrary to the political evolution of those times. (Cioculescu, 1987, 9).

And we may add, also contrary to the political sympathies of those times, well-defined in time, the carrying out of the show. It seems as if he wrote in order to fight „against the system” but this is not exactly true. His comedies affect the entire social stage, political or economic, conventional on all levels of society, no matter whom or what was controlling the political stage at a particular moment in time. The conceptual absolute dimension of the social and moral typologies that the playwright identified in society, the fact that he was forced to write every day – today we would call this „as for a daily newspaper” – given his profound relationship with the press of his time, the manner in which he approached these typologies especially because of his formation as journalist, social detective, the profound analysis he managed to capture for each character or event given that he was meant to write afterwards about them, all of these and many others relative to his inherent structure of author and critic made him access, anthropologically speaking, a level of general reachability only through the particular passageways, specifically that special type of essentialised hermeneutics of concepts. Defining in this matter is the event that took place on April 25 1895, when „O scrisoare pierdută” played against his will and despite his protests.

I have not given my permission to anyone to stage any of my plays, because all the artists who created those roles are dead and any other round, in order to be truly honorable – especially after the warm memories left by unforgettable artists such as Iulian, Mateescu, Panu, Dănescu etc. – would need a fundamental mise-en-scene, not improvisations or hasty attempts, completely alienated from any artistic purpose. (Caragiale, 1963, 197-198).

Furthermore, the fact that one of the actors took a central figure of the political world of those times as a model, deeply upset Caragiale.

The artists /.../ allowed themselves/.../ against any rational thought, to create masks based on remarkable persons, well seen in society. (Caragiale, 1963, 197-198), fact that injures me deeply and against which my artistic conscience has to riot, as my works are not some buffooneries meant to mock real persons, but pieces of art in order to show in the most durable manner the ideal types. (Caragiale, 1963, 199).

This event was discussed many times in that period. Even if there were voices against it, many critics tended to support his opinion. Among the names who supported him in his endeavor was Ion C. Bacalbașa, who defends Caragiale by explaining in detail how and when the actors made the mistakes. „*O scrisoare pierdută* was played in an outrageous manner, as it did not resemble anymore what we have seen eight, nine years ago. Few artists were still keeping alive the ancient glory but the other ones were weak, lifeless, and insecure” (Cronica literară, 1895). Regarding Caragiale’s anger, that the actors were imitating real persons from the political stage, trying to easily catch the attention of a public ultimately uneducated in the matter, a public that expected the play to „fail”, Bacalbașa supports him, suggesting that „the characters were deprived of their general nature and they were dressed with the inappropriate coat of a certain typology”. (Cronica literară, 1895).

The moment above mentioned is one of the few when Caragiale was actually and seriously upset and spoke publicly about it. Usually, his weapons were the press articles, irony as well as satire. Thus, if the weapon used in order to fight „the idealism of this time”, as Cioculescu calls it, was banter, this proved to be a tough weapon, considering the fact that the reactions were very strong. „Caragiale’s banter – who created the idea of whim, or rather took it from the old comic editorials, but gave it heaviness and power – was the weapon used by him to fight the idealism of his time”. (Cioculescu, 1987, 10)

We need to emphasize as well the fact that this tendency of swimming against the currents and stirring up debates, envy, anger and other opposing reactions, was not an arbitrary attitude. It was not a rebellion started by a young spirit who considered, without having any life experience, that it is more interesting opposing the others without relevant arguments or viable conclusions. Caragiale’s rebellion was one of the common sense of the genius who reads profoundly the idea that the things are going in the wrong direction and is not afraid of claiming this while taking the risk of upsetting or angering, or arousing debates. The space that he created outside the circle is in fact Brook’s „empty space”, a space that can be filled only with the honesty of experiences, either good or bad. The creation of the ego in this empty space can only be produced in a state of grace, sincerity and total vision of the own being. Thus, if such a thing happens, the empty space would fill itself with the experiences of the visions that weigh on the present, a weight validated by the acknowledgment of the personal artistic potency. Some would call this „filling the stage”, others „magnetism” or „charisma”, maybe „stage experience” or „talent”. Only the strong self-knowledge of the own entitlement is capable of reaching alone a state of grace that allows a real connection achieved between I and the ultimate energy of art, whatever it may mean to any of the creator. If the inner space is populated with ideas, memories, experiences and this continues in every moment, as a convention well-defined, this will be visible on the outside as well. Caragiale was one of those who reached this stage of evolution. Even if during his era these theories did not exist, or they were not realized, it seems that nowadays, our great playwright can be described in such terms. The reaction of those around such a hard to decipher phenomenon, if not impossible, is usually of rejection, based on some sort of fear of the simple human being in front of the unleashed forces of nature. This might be the reason why Caragiale shocked, made people discontent and stirred up an envy almost impossible. Cioculescu describes him correctly by suggesting that „.../ Caragiale’s attitude towards the common opinion, either regarding the major political orientation, in the sense of liberalism, or the literary and artistic preference, of embracing the mediocrity, was that of a heretical.”. (Cioculescu, 1987, 10)

Regarding this inner structure that various critics and theorists have approached until now, it does not start out of a confusing legacy that Caragiale might have tried to emphasize. Cioculescu resumes this theory of the distancing phenomenon that we have made previously relative to the „empty space”. Hence, Caragiale seems to be the product taken back in time –

we can make use again of the mirror principle- of the impurities of his era and the purity of his inner time.

He is our first great urban writer who, disregarding his actor bloodline, does not have a connection with the countryside, the root of our bourgeoisie. As a product only in the second generation of our urban society – as his grandfather was born in the countryside- Caragiale accuses an interesting phenomenon of distancing himself from the middle-class hybridity but without manifesting through reaction a mystical ruralism. It is more interesting to watch the reflection of the rural life in the work of such a writer. (...) (Cioculescu, 1987, 25-26).

His distancing from the middle-class hybridity takes place in the entire world surrounding Caragiale, whatever profile or field we take into account. This distancing means ultimately, after various analyses and conclusions, a need for freedom. This man needed freedom as he needed air. He himself acknowledges the fact that this is one of the reasons he remained a press writer. „A man of the people, without a birth name, without fortune, support, nobody allowed me to forget –no matter how less I mean as a publicist- that I had not other protector in this world but the freedom of print. (Cioculescu, 1987, 25-26).

In any case, we must emphasize here Caragiale's smile that appears every time he mentions his little standing in a society where the origins, family, and historical events you have lived are the only ones who can validate you as an individual of importance, your own existence. He was always amusing himself by telling some of the elite writers such as Maiorescu or Hașdeu, that he is a peasant, but not a Romanian peasant, but one with Greek origins.

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